

Alloway Bank  
346 Eleven Mile Drive  
BATHURST NSW 2795

24 March 2020

The Heritage Council of NSW  
[HERITAGEmailbox@environment.nsw.gov.au](mailto:HERITAGEmailbox@environment.nsw.gov.au)

I understand that the Heritage Council is to consider listing part only of the Ultimo Tramways Power House, 500 Harris Street Ultimo, on the State Heritage Register because of its significance in generating electricity to power Sydney's tram network.

The tram system, dismantled about 1961, is now being reinstated in limited form and at vast expense. Heritage listing of the power-generating halls may tick a box in a bureaucrat's list, but it's a very blinkered approach to conservation of the State's heritage, and ignores the benefits of a broad-based approach.

You would have to be living under a rock not to have noticed that the Ultimo Power House site is of even greater significance because of the sensitive adaptive re-use of the buildings as the Powerhouse Museum, a great architectural, cultural and social achievement for the NSW Government, for those skilled, intelligent people from varied backgrounds and viewpoints involved in its transformation and for the millions of visitors who enjoyed seeing the huge range of objects displayed across a range of disciplines for their learning, understanding and enjoyment. Plus of course the innovative science-based interactive displays.

The Museum grew out of the Sydney International Exhibition of 1879–1880, the first time NSW hosted an international gathering highlighting a wide range of industry, manufactures and arts. From the beginnings in 1882, the museum has displayed the artistic, social, technological and engineering developments of NSW and the wider world. In recent years, this mission has been narrowed and the Museum hijacked by a small, narrow interest group trying to claw favour and approbation from the fashion and design personalities in Sydney. And to what end? The

highlight of their “work” was a disastrous fashion party fundraiser that was so enthusiastically supported by the fashion industry that taxpayers subsidised it with \$215,000, just so the party animals could flaunt themselves.

Displaying locomotives, once essential to regional NSW, may be embarrassing for governments which have short-sightedly and continuously withdrawn regional transport services, when progressive countries have been building infrastructure, tourism, social cohesion and regional centres not only through maintaining railways but by expanding them with high-speed train services which invigorate and provide multiple opportunities for regional communities. Steam and other engines show how harnessing power transformed industry and people’s lives by increasing productivity – and specifically by allowing the NSW economy to diversify from agriculture to manufacturing – and bringing people and produce from the regions to the cities and ports. The introduction of portable steam engines, steam traction engines and later self-propelled tractors revolutionised cropping and food productivity.

In this time of coronavirus pandemic, it is worth investigating whether we really can all be artists and designers operating in a global economy; maybe there’s a place for agriculture, mining and manufacturing too, especially in regional NSW which this Government ignores as it throws money at more and more unnecessary projects in Sydney – downsizing and gutting the Powerhouse Museum being just one notable example. Demolishing the Moore Park football stadium is even more profligate.

If the Powerhouse Museum goes, the people of NSW, and especially those in regional NSW, will lose this resource so that, by a simple change of use, change of zoning and raising permissible building heights, developers will be able to reap the profits. It may produce instant wealth for some, but it’s an intellectually bankrupt approach to economic development and state infrastructure planning from our State Liberal-National coalition politicians.

The whole, integrated Powerhouse Museum site and its contents should be listed, not just the tiny part of it that is too hard to demolish. Why would you list the remnants of the power station but exclude the building that housed the trams themselves (now called the Harwood Building)? Or the collection of artefacts on which this State was built by the hard work of its citizens, who no longer seem to count?

A pale shadow of the Powerhouse Museum on a frequently flood-prone site at Parramatta, in a building that looks like an abandoned milk crate,

run by bureaucrats who have never done a day's real work in their lives (we saw on the television news recently at a Parliamentary inquiry that one MAAS executive could not locate the front door on architectural drawings), is no substitute for an inclusive, inspiring institution that everyone in city AND regional NSW can enjoy and be proud of – or could, if successive Boards and management were competent.

If anything, the Powerhouse Museum needs to expand its range of interests to include, for instance, public exhibitions and programs to explain phenomena such as the COVID-19 virus and how it will inevitably change society. This is not unprecedented; the impact of European diseases on Indigenous Australians after 1788 must have been even more catastrophic, yet is now conveniently being ignored. Above all, museums are about documenting change.

Dismantling the Powerhouse Museum is, like the removal of Sydney's trams in 1961, a retrograde step. Another, more enlightened Government will have to restore the institution in the future.

*I urge you to look at the bigger picture* and please don't cherry pick parts of the building to preserve. List the whole, integrated Powerhouse Museum, both new and old plus the collection, on the State Heritage Register. Otherwise, we will know that the process is a sham, a façade for selling off land for more quick-profit high rise, a temporary solution to Sydney's growth at the expense of the whole State.

Yours sincerely

John Wade

0400 674 466  
johnwade@optusnet.com.au